

Bread: who needs it?

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Ninth Sunday after Trinity, 29/7/18

Two thoughts occurred while I was pondering this week's sermon. One, probably prompted by having just had a few days away when I wasn't cooking for myself, was how much food there is in the Bible, and how much of it is miraculous. There is the Israelites' meal before the Exodus, the manna in the wilderness, the never-ending flour and oil for the widow who looked after Elijah, Elijah himself being fed by ravens, Elisha's 'feeding of the hundred' in our first reading, all those promises of banquets prepared by God for the faithful which are described in the Psalms and by the prophets, various wedding feasts, Jesus eating with the tax collector and the Pharisee, Passover meals, that evening meal at Emmaus, and, of course, the second most famous meal in today's gospel: the feeding of the five thousand. (The most famous meal is the Last Supper, which we remember each Sunday and which is miraculous in a rather different way.)

The second thought was that making a sermon is very much like making bread. Both are a collaboration between God and people. You get the ingredients – flour, water, yeast and salt, or Bible readings – together in advance, mix them up and leave them for a while. Pummel the mixture occasionally. A few hours before the finished product is needed, work it over again, encourage it into the required shape and cook it until done. It doesn't look like bread, or a sermon, for most of the time, but it usually turns out all right at the end.

There is a common thread through all the 'miraculous food' stories: the food is for everyone, and it comes in effectively limitless quantities. There is enough, enough to share, and more than enough. While I'm sure you hope sermons won't go on until you've all had more than enough, preachers certainly hope you'll each find something in them for yourself, and maybe even something to share with someone else.

Food is one of the absolute essentials for human survival. We can go without it for short periods, but psychologists (and mothers) know that if someone is deprived someone of food for long, especially if they don't know when or if they will get another meal, it becomes increasingly hard for them to concentrate on anything else. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has food security as one of its most basic elements. Jesus knew this. He knew that he couldn't go on teaching the crowds effectively once they began to get hungry. It was important at other times too – when he healed Jairus' daughter his first instruction was 'give her something to eat'.

It's essential to meet and satisfy basic human needs. There are plenty of Biblical warnings about greed and luxury, but everyone has a right to food, shelter and safety. Which is why we should be thoroughly ashamed of living in a prosperous country which allows so many people to be hungry and homeless. Jesus' instruction to the disciples (in Matthew's version of the story) is also an instruction to us: 'You give them something to eat.' We will all have different ways of doing this, according to our individual means and abilities. The one thing we must not do is to shrug off the responsibility and leave the problem to the great anonymous 'them'. As the boy demonstrated, no contribution is too small to be useful.

So the 5,000 (men), plus an indeterminate number of women and children, sat down and ate. While sharing the food, they started to share other things. They talked, probably to nearby strangers as well as the family or friends they were with. They started to discuss what they had heard, chewing over and digesting Jesus' words at the same time they chewed and digested the bread and fish. They became literal companions – sharers of bread – and started to become spiritual companions. The Bible has many examples where food is a metaphor for spiritual understanding: Jesus' sayings about the Bread of Life, Paul feeding the Corinthians with spiritual milk because they were not ready for solid food, John eating the scroll in the Book of Revelation, or Isaiah's prophecy: 'The Lord said...listen carefully to me and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me; listen that you may live.'

This is the time of year when many of us are able to wind down a bit and maybe take a holiday. Wherever we go there will be bread, possibly interestingly different from what we usually eat, whether white sliced or artisan sourdough. Bread is powerful stuff, and it is enjoyable to try out different varieties. It can be a time for some reading as well – stretching out by the pool with the latest novel. It could even be time for some thinking. Maybe you need, and actually have some time for, some spiritual food. Try out a different variety of this, too. It need not be an explicitly religious book. It could be one which gives you a new or deeper perspective on some aspect of humanity, and challenges you to respond more positively to that command: 'You give them something to eat.' Come back relaxed, refreshed and renewed, and remember: just as we need (and knead) bread, so we also need (and must knead) the gospels, breaking bread and breaking the Word with our companions.